



Talent Acquisition – The Battle For **Tomorrow**

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John O. Burdett



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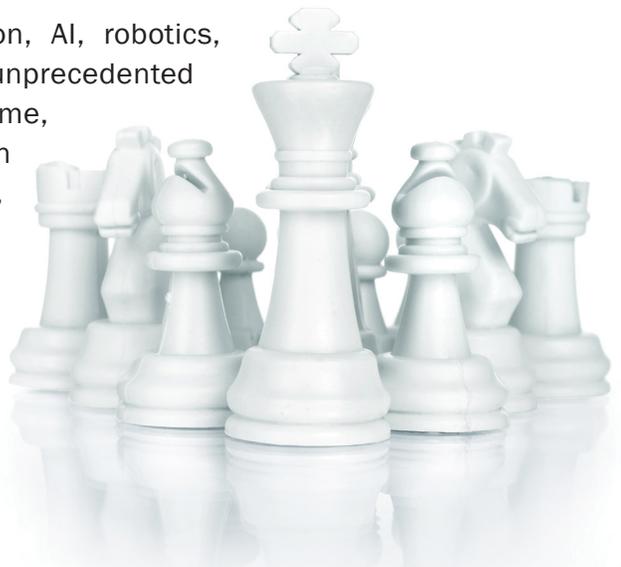
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Recruiting top talent will only get harder

From our kind’s earliest experience of work, the golden rule – *he/she with the gold rules* – was pretty much the only rule. It was the central feature of an agrarian economy; it shaped decision-making in a world based on steam power; and in an era of mass production jobs became de-skilled to the point that the worker was little more than an extension of the machine. Simply put: in the “master-servant relationship” the power lay exclusively with the master. “If we need more workers they will come.”

And then along came the microchip, globalisation, AI, robotics, blockchain, machine learning, gig employment and unprecedented disruption. The board has been reset. For the first time, literally, since the plague¹ the “worker” has been handed the reins of power. Add the speed of change, the paucity of skills that are quickly becoming central to a digital world and an education system that is still equipping people for the needs of the last century and it’s clear that recruiting top talent is about to get harder. Take into account that over half of the jobs that will emerge a decade from now don’t currently exist and what you really have is “a crisis.”



1 Starting in the 14th century, successive waves of the plague depopulated the countryside to the point where serfdom could no longer be enforced and the wage economy was born. For a short period of time the workers had the upper hand.



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Who gets hired today shapes what’s possible tomorrow. And yet, a major study in 2014 by Gallup finds that companies fail to choose the candidate with the right talent for the job 82% of the time.² A 2013 research project,³ involving 320 newly hired, U.S.-based, C-suite executives, from 36 major organizations, determined that nearly half failed within the first 18 months.⁴ A decade earlier the Center for Creative Leadership estimated that 40% of CEOs fail in the first 18 months.

Were all that not challenge enough, there is a deep, value-destroying secret embedded in the social architecture of a good many “modern” organizations. That secret ... relatively few leaders would gain a passing grade if their recruitment-savvy, interview skills, the process employed and overall judgement around fit were fully assessed.⁵ To echo Winston Churchill, “Things are not always right because they are hard, but if they are right one must not mind if they are hard.”

Recruitment has always been a battleground of sorts. Three issues combine to make it evermore so. One: scarcity – the ever-increasing difficulty and, indeed, frustration of uncovering talent. Two: talent acquisition is part of a wider talent management system and if the other elements in the system (e.g., leadership development, coaching, performance management, a culture that supports team effectiveness) are poorly thought through, excellence in the actual hiring process is quickly lost. Three: in a world unfolding faster than it ever has in human history, recruitment is, and must be, strategic.

The need for talent acquisition to be strategic lies in sharp contrast to, what I would suggest is, common practice: simply finding a replacement for the manager who was most recently (is currently) in the role. If your organization, by way of design and hiring practices, looks pretty much as it did at the turn of the century you are working in what amounts to “a living museum.” And if those you are hiring are sourced largely on the presumption that the current way to work merely needs to get better, you are not hiring leaders ... you are populating the business with expensive curators.

Figure one outlines the cultural shift taking place in leading-edge organizations. We are describing not merely an abstract sense of a better way, but a very different mindset about what it means to lead. Doing what we have always done – hiring who we have always hired – is just another way to describe “mediocrity.”

The mystery inside the riddle that lies at the heart of the hiring process is that although there is a veritable army of potential candidates, few amongst those available are TOP talent. For

2 Randall Beck and James Harter, “Why Good Managers Are So Rare.” *Harvard Business Review* (March 2014).

3 Jean Martin, “For Senior Leaders, Fit Matters More Than Skills” *Harvard Business Review* (January 17, 2014).

4 *Harvard Business Review* (January 2005).

5 To audit how effective your talent acquisition process really is, see John O. Burdett, *The Empty Suit* (2016).



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TOP read: “**T**ested,⁶ **O**utstanding, **P**erformers.” When digital direction, managing complexity, speed of learning, a network-centric mindset and comfort with ambiguity are combined with strategic thinking, financial savvy, results orientation and coaching as performance imperatives, it’s truly a case of from the many available ... to the few who are truly qualified.

Making talent acquisition a competitive advantage

Where to start? What do we need to do to take talent acquisition to the next level? How do we make the capacity to add the right talent the difference that starts to make a difference? How do we make who and how we hire a sustainable competitive advantage? After spending more than three decades either directly hiring executives around the world and/or supporting those who do, five “truths” emerge.

Figure one

1. Attraction is the orphan child of talent acquisition. Uncovering and then attracting outstanding talent is, for the majority of business leaders, the human resource equivalent of a wing and a prayer. This represents a huge talent acquisition shortfall. No matter the quality and level of investment in the rest of the talent process, the simple truth is you can’t hire talent you don’t attract.

“Attraction” starts with good research. With social media and AI destined to play an ever-bigger role and as algorithms get better, a good deal of that covered under the term “sourcing

	LEADERSHIP: 1999	LEADERSHIP: 2019
	The “plan”	Strategic scenarios
	Superstars	Super teams
	Strategy drives culture	Culture enables strategy
	The team works for the leader	The leader works for the team
	Structure: hierarchical	Structure: network centred
	Team: homogenous	Team: multicultural
	The one best way	Comfort with ambiguity
	Expertise	Speed of learning
	If it ain’t broke don’t fix it	Introduce disruptive technologies
	Change management	Reframe mindsets
	Enrich the tribe	Build community
	Steady state	Embrace complexity

⁶ “Tested” in this context has nothing to do with psychometric assessment and everything to do with the right experience.



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talent” will be automated.⁷ The promise of digitalization is about to become fact.

Early in the hiring process, no matter how the candidate was identified, comes the, so important, first contact. The executive you want is unlikely to be the one who is eager to jump ship. Outstanding leaders are successful where they are. Their response to an initial overture is likely to be, “I have a great job here, why should I join ABC Company?” The organization’s reputation, the company’s website, the right information succinctly delivered and the ability of the caller to share the organization’s story (hiring brand) all help the cause. That said, for top candidates these provide only part of the answer.

What the reluctant candidate really wants to know is, “What is it really like to work in this business you are representing?” You can invite me to drink the Kool-Aid, I’ll visit the showroom and I’ll even wear the T-shirt, but tell me, what’s this organization really all about? What’s under the hood?” Enter stage left a simple insight ... what keeps top talent attracts top talent. “You are obviously keen to know what it’s really like to work for ABC Company. In a recent conversation with some of the organization’s top performers here is what they said about why they love working for the organization ...”

Inspiration rests, in no small measure, on the perception that what we are being told is authentic. Seasoned leaders are quick to recognise even a whiff of bovine effluent. The recruiter, be he/she working from within the firm or not, clearly has a vested interest in gilding the lily. Meanwhile, if the recruiter (researcher) works for an external provider (e.g., executive search), any response that describes what the hiring organization is really like to work for – that is anything less than totally authentic – comes across as little more than a warmed-over version of what the candidate expects to hear. And don’t imagine for a moment that the candidate doesn’t hear “the sell” in every phrase and nuance of what he/she is being “sold.” Nothing beats presenting the facts. Nothing has the emotional impact of the truth simply presented. Nothing is more influential than an authentic voice.

Convey the right information and the candidate is *informed*. Introduce the organization’s story and the candidate starts to get *involved*. Share why the organization’s top talent chooses to stay and the candidate is *inspired*. The very best candidates are reluctant to move. It’s not enough to *inform*. It’s not enough to *involve*. To attract top performers ... you have to inspire them.

⁷ HireVue offers AI-based, video analysis of the candidate’s facial expressions, body language and tone of voice to conduct on-demand interviews. Predictive analytics, on-line psychometrics using advanced algorithms overcome interviewer bias. Chatbots can conduct initial, virtual, screening interviews. Data mining algorithms can delve into, virtually, every aspect of the candidate’s background. Unilever, for example, has already put 250,000 candidates through an algorithm-driven selection process. Blockchain technology, acting on behalf of the candidate, lies around the corner.



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Why do your most talented people stay? How do you know? When did you last ask them?⁸

2. If you don't know what you are looking for only an optimist on stilts would assume that they might find it. Talent acquisition is ultimately about managing risk. Risk, in turn, is about fit. There are five critical dimensions of fit: (1) Fit with the *organization's values*;⁹ (2) *culture fit* (this implies measurement of today's culture and the culture the organization needs to be successful in the future); (3) *performance fit* (building a scorecard for the role); (4) *leadership fit* (role-specific competencies); and (5) *team fit* (this demands a meaningful assessment of the team¹⁰). Even if you are driving a Ferrari; if one of the four wheels and/or the steering wheel is missing ... you are not going to go very far. See **Figure two**.

Generic leadership competencies answer the question, "What does it mean to be a successful leader in this organization?" Role-specific leadership competencies answer the question, "What does it mean to be a successful leader **in this role**?" There is a time and place for improvisation and informed guesswork. That said, an apt definition might describe such a behaviour as "gambling." Defining success in a key role that has just become open isn't the time to wager a bet. A miss-hire can easily end up costing 15 times or even 20 times the annual salary. This is to say nothing of the opportunity cost, the disruption to the team and/or those times when hiring a key executive amounts to betting the business.

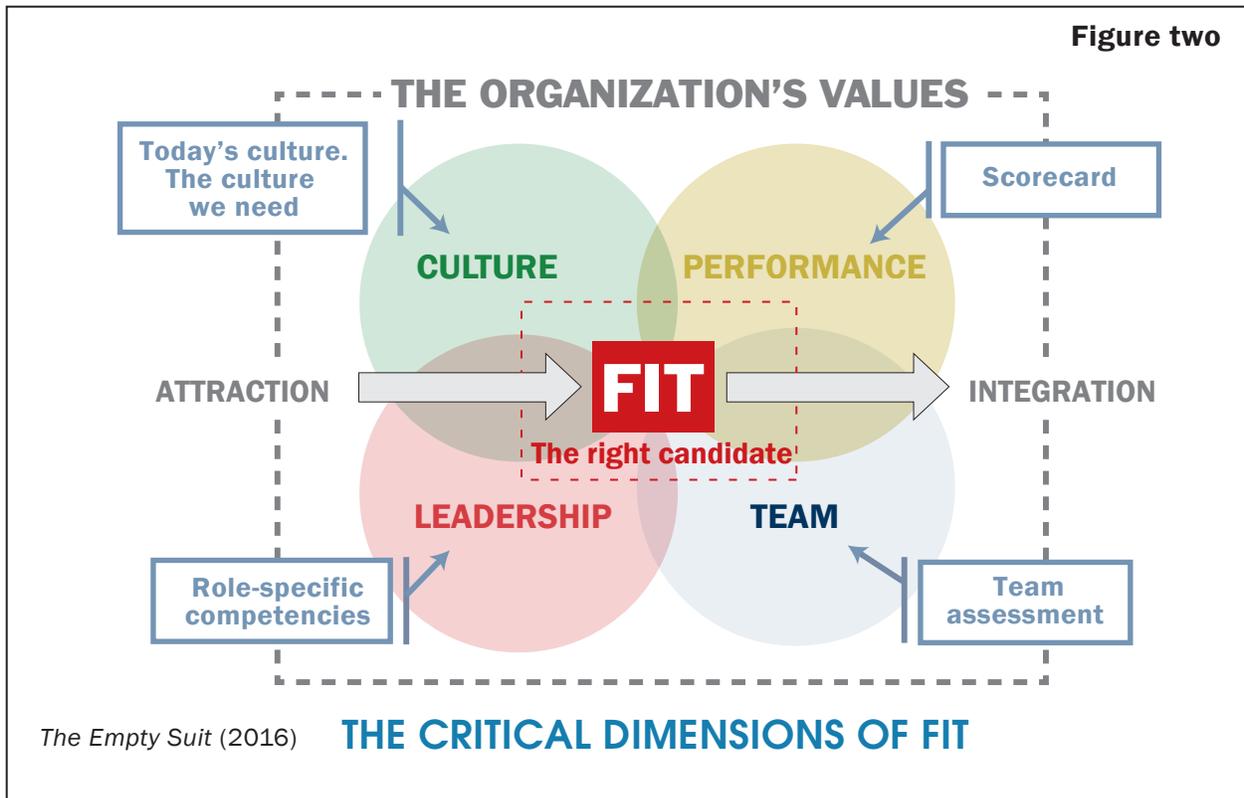
Somewhere in orchestrating fit a new reality emerges. For the first time since the birth of the Industrial Revolution, the team has truly become the building block of organizational success. The network organization, the power of expertise, the speed of change, the need to release the creativity and talent of employees at every level, the portability of

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- 8 In truth, simply asking isn't enough. Without a robust process, without a repertoire of choices (in our case 50 well-researched retention alternatives) supported by skilled facilitation, even the most articulate leaders tend to come up with superficial answers. The proprietary and highly lauded, Orxestra "Why do your top people stay?" process not only takes a group of high performers through the retention questions in less than 90 minutes, it also establishes the RI (Retention Index) for that part of the organization. Knowing why top people stay is an important insight for any number of reasons. Just acquired a new organization? How much would it be worth to know (really know) why their best people stay?
 - 9 The organization's values represent the CEO's and, by implication, the leadership point of view of the top team. The challenge being that although many organizations propret to have robust organization values for perhaps the majority they amount to little more than window dressing. Where the organization's values are either absent or only of secondary importance the default action is to shape behaviour by introducing "rules." Rules not only ensure that even simple decisions take longer to make but they quickly become enforceable boundaries that those who are interested in protecting "turf" are quick to erect.
 - 10 For a measure of the team, see John O. Burdett, *TEAM: Align, Build, Connect & Develop* (2015). The Taking Your Team to the Next Level Assessment looks at the team through four distinct lenses (1) What does the team need to know? (2) How effective is the team leader? (3) Where and how can those on the team become better team players? and (4) What does the team need to do to accelerate through the performance/learning curve?

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talent and that innovation is indelibly linked to diversity and the freedom to act, all mean that we need super teams far more than superstars. President Teddy Roosevelt suggested that leadership meant, “Talking softly and carrying a big stick.” The only reason a team leader should carry a big stick today is to strike him/herself sharply around the head, if for a moment he/she forgets that he/she works for the team ... not that the team works for him/her.

3. The vast majority of those who hold down leadership roles have only a rudimentary understanding of how to interview.¹¹ If you don’t believe me ask your key executives when they last received interview training! Without instruction, guidance and feedback, doing something often doesn’t necessarily make you better at it. And what we learn from doing it wrong ... is how to get better at doing it wrong. The irony is that many candidates are now far better prepared for the interview than the time-stretched hiring manager. Where interview mastery is missing (there is nothing more important to team success than who is hired!), the fallback position is that the position goes to the candidate with the best résumé. Unfortunately, all too often, who/what turns up to start work on Monday isn’t a great candidate ... it’s an empty suit. For every hour inappropriately stripped out



¹¹ See *The Evidence-based Interview*. John O. Burdett (2019).



of the hiring process expect to spend at least 100 hours attempting to “fix” a candidate identified in haste. That such efforts invariably fail only adds to the frustration.

4. The interview is both a science and an art. The push to make “fit” increasingly a game of numbers is inevitable. It’s a mistake, however, to dilute the role intuition and judgement play. The interview as a science is manifest in the evidence-based interview™. This draws on the widely accepted assumption that past performance is the best guide to future success. The interview as an art explores 5Cs: character (response to the unexpected ... resilience), chemistry (fit/adjustment with the team in mind), congruency (does the candidate’s body language, attitude and overall approach match his/her story?), and compatibility (does the candidate’s speed of learning complement the speed of change in the marketplace?). Interactive software, leveraging big numbers and evermore scientific approaches to fit are both meaningful and inevitable. Conversely, overriding 150,000 years of social evolution is to ignore behavioural filters that, in an unpredictable world, are more important than ever.
5. If they don’t land, they won’t stay. Admittedly, integration is becoming recognised as an important part of the hiring process. Unfortunately, the common remedy – outsourcing integration support – often delivers an incomplete solution. While not wanting to decry the value of onboarding consulting, nothing is more important than (1) a team leader who is a great role model; and (2) a team member who is skilled, and puts in quality time as a mentor. If those two integration characteristics are missing even the best external input may well be found wanting. Keep in mind; integration kicks in before the successful candidate joins the firm.¹²

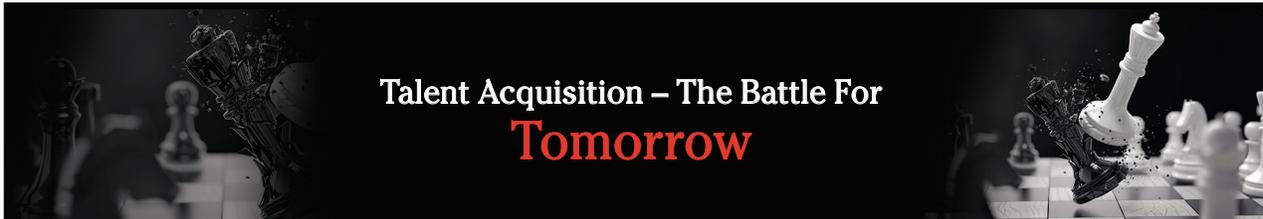
What value creation¹³ should the client expect from a search provider?

Without access to best practice, forging new ways to think becomes an uphill battle. Without new questions learning is limited. Where successful role models are missing, our extraordinary ability to copy what works cannot kick in. And when thought leadership is little more than “a consulting label” creating tomorrow today becomes a bridge too far. There is clearly a good deal to gain, therefore, from working with best-in-class, external resources. To that end, at a minimum, in addition to sector expertise and international capability, the search provider must deliver distinct value in seven critical areas.

1. Bring creativity and flair when it comes to attracting top talent. The organization’s story underscores a successful hiring value proposition. Central to that story are the hiring

¹² See John O. Burdett, *Without Breaking Stride* (2005). *Without Breaking Stride* is a comprehensive workbook currently used in over 40 countries.

¹³ In a world marked by speed of change, doing what we have always done, better (value added) – is not enough. The right search partner will deliver the ideas, capability and experience to help the client take talent acquisition to the next level.



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organization's values. Unfortunately, although the majority of organizations claim to have "organization values," in many instances, they amount to little more than window dressing. To "win" top talent over even a great story may not be enough. A best-in-class search professional draws out why high performers stay and leverages that insight to inspire the candidate who is happy where he/she is.

2. Help the client **measure** the culture they have today (roots) and the culture the organization needs moving forward (wings). The operative word here is "measure."¹⁴ You can't manage what you don't measure. Talent acquisition devoid of a robust measure of the culture the organization needs to compete tomorrow ... amounts to little more than the hiring executive's "best guess."¹⁵
3. Leading-edge tools to build a robust, balanced scorecard for the position.
4. Develop **role-specific** competencies for the role in question. This implies a library of relevant and up-to-date leadership competencies. It also means a proven leadership model that ensures that the competencies identified deliver "leadership balance."¹⁶ Balance denotes fit in four critical leadership areas: (1) Direction, (2) the Discipline of Delivery, (3) Development of people; and (4) Day-to-day Dialogue.¹⁷
5. Provide a meaningful process to determine team fit. As with culture, this implies measurement.
6. Coach inexperienced line managers in how to conduct the interview.
7. Bring support and appropriate tools to the integration process, and that means a good deal more than the perfunctory call to see if the newly hired candidate is doing okay.

Talent acquisition cannot thrive in a vacuum. It's an integral part of the overall talent management system. If you hire great people and coaching is a hard-to-find skill, assume a higher attrition rate than might be expected. If "succession" is poorly thought through expect to go outside for talent more often than is good for the organization's health. And if the leadership development agenda is found wanting, know that over-hiring for virtually every position will be a given.¹⁸

14 The approach to measuring culture needs to reflect the context. By way of example, an organization confronting transformational change faces a very different challenge to that of a successful business seeking to better manage the culture they have. It is also important – and especially so in talent acquisition – that the approach describes the cultural journey in business terms.

15 For a unique and compelling measure of Organization Culture see – *The A-Z Of Organization Culture*. John O. Burdett (2017).

16 For a measure of leadership balance, see John O. Burdett, *Attract, Select, Develop & Retain TALENT* (2013).

17 This simple leadership template is the outcome of asking 15,000 leaders in 40 countries, "What do you NEED from a leader?" It's framed in much of my work as the Head, the Hand, the Heart, and the Spirit. See John O. Burdett, *New Role, New Reality* (2000).

18 For more on Talent Management as an integrated system, see John O. Burdett, *Attract, Select, Develop & Retain TALENT* (2013). In the same text you will also find a unique approach that will allow you to audit your talent management system.



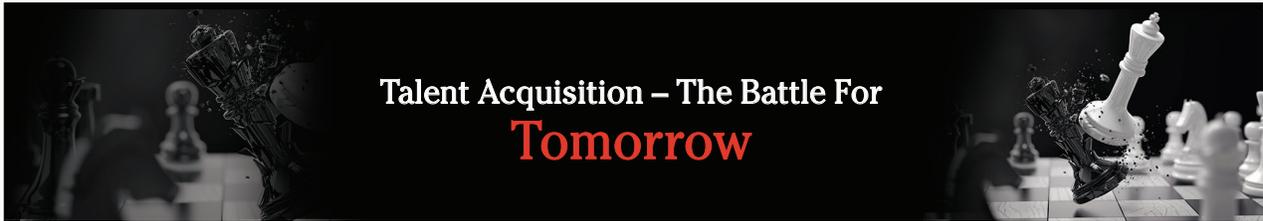
The implications are profound. When the seven dimensions of distinct value (offered by the executive search provider) are either missing or short-changed and where the search is delivered as a tactical “replacement” – not as strategic and integral to the client’s overall talent management system – the inevitable, default outcome is to hire **the best** and not **the right** candidate.

Uncovering the best candidate is, essentially, a beauty contest. It’s the corporate version of the popular NBC talent show *America’s Got Talent*. If they look and sound good, give them a ticket to Vegas. On the other hand, finding the **right** candidate is a matchless investment in building tomorrow’s leadership bench strength ... today.

For many service providers business development is perceived as a kind of wrestling match

Figure three

CONSULTANT	PARTNER
Builds on what worked in the past	Thought leader
Ask for the sale – tactical, short-term	Strategic – strives to make the client’s business better
Largely domestic experience to draw on	In that today every business is an international business, brings genuine international reach and experience to every search
Responds to specific requests	Creates value for the client between searches
Differentiation based on consultant’s assumed expertise	Differentiation based on expertise + winning process that mitigates risk
Winning is about providing a candidate who meets the criteria defined by the role	Winning takes into account succession, the emerging culture and the capability of the hiring leader
Looks for “superstars”	Helps the client build super teams
One size fits all	Shapes the “agreed” process to fit the client’s capability and established approach
Adds value	Creates value
Gives advice	Acts as a mentor and coach where the situation demands it



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... where the next sale, overcoming objections and asking for the order become the name of the game. Delivering all of the elements of fit, landing the right candidate is predicated on a supplier/client relationship that goes beyond “winning the sale.” It speaks of a trust-based partnership where long-term success is based on the search provider understanding the client’s emerging business need as well as the client does. It defines a way to work where making the client’s business better **always** takes precedence. It builds on a mindset where **BRAND** means **Better Results And No Disappointment**.

Successful business development ultimately draws on one simple question, “What do we have to do to ensure that the client views us not as a supplier but as truly part of their team? See **Figure three**.

Conclusion

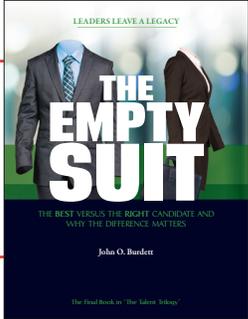
Write down what successful leaders must do well and you end up with a pretty long list. Pare that list down to include only those leadership attributes that are **absolutely essential** and the number is significantly reduced. And if talent acquisition doesn’t head that list ... it will certainly fall in the top three. If you’re a leader, bringing talent into the team is the one thing you absolutely can’t afford to get wrong. The good news ... get the hiring process right and success as a leader becomes a whole lot easier.

Key questions

1. Attraction. Why do your very best people stay? How do you know? If you don’t know why they stay ... it’s tough to do more of it.
2. The interview. Whether you are a hiring executive or a search professional, when were you most recently trained/coached in interviewing ... both as a science and an art? Pressing need unsupported by meaningful expertise is a mistake waiting to happen.
3. The right candidate. Is your talent acquisition process landing the best or delivering the right candidate? Is a scorecard the basis for determining future performance expectations? Do you build role-specific leadership competencies for the role in question? Do you or the providers who support you deliver tools that will measure team effectiveness?
4. Culture. Recognising that the more senior the hire the more important culture fit becomes, how do you define the organization culture you have (roots)... **and the culture you need (wings)?** Define means measure!
5. External support. Are your search providers equipped and motivated to become a full partner to your organization’s approach to talent acquisition?

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Note: the ideas contained in this paper are drawn in part from *The Empty Suit*. John O. Burdett (2016).



John has extensive international experience as a senior executive. As a consultant he has worked in more than 40 countries for organizations that are household names. The founder of Orxestra Inc., he is the leadership advisor to TRANSEARCH International and strategic partner to the Bedford Consulting Group.

He has published ten best-selling books on leadership and organization culture. His Talent Trilogy was completed in 2016. The first in the series, *Attract, Select, Develop & Retain TALENT*, was published in 2013. The second book, *TEAM: Align, Build, Connect and Develop*, came out in early 2015. *The Empty Suit*, 2016. *The A-Z of Coaching* came out in 2017. The Evidence-based Interview will be his next offering.

See also John’s new series of “one-chapter books” focusing on critical leadership issues. Go to Amazon.com, eBooks, Barnes and Noble and Kobo to download. Access using author’s name: John O. Burdett.



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